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FOLK-SONG AND AMERICAN MUSIC

(A PLEA FOR THE UNPOPULAR POINT OF VIEW)

By DANIEL GREGORY MASON

THAT type of musical æsthetic which insists much on the importance of the racial and national differences dividing human kind into groups, and of the special features, technical and expressive, characterizing the music of these various groups, is constantly challenging our American music to disavow what it calls a featureless cosmopolitanism, and to achieve individuality by idealizing some primitive popular strain, whether of the Indians, of the negroes, of the British colonizers, or of our contemporary "rag-time." In so doing, it usually accepts uncritically certain assumptions. It is apt to assume, for instance, that interpretative truth is assured by geographical propinquity. The chant of the Indian "expresses" the modern American because the habitat of both is west of the Atlantic Ocean. It often assumes that characteristic turns of idiom, such as certain modal intervals or rhythmic figures, are of intrinsic value as making music "distinctive." You can make a tune "American" by "ragging" its rhythm, as you make a story American by inserting "I guess" or "I reckon" at frequent intervals. It often mistakes the conception of the average for that of the ideal type, and supposes that the man in the street represents the best taste of America. Above all, it condemns any attempt at universalizing artistic utterance as "featureless cosmopolitanism" or "flabby eclecticism", and suggests that the musician who speaks, not a dialect but a language understood over the civilized world (as Tschaikowsky did, for example, to the disgust of the Russian nationalists), has "lost contact", as the phrase goes, "with the soil." In the

interest of clear thinking all these assumptions stand in need of criticism.

It is hardly possible even to state the first without recognizing the large measure of absurdity it contains. That the crude war dances and chants of the red aborigines of this continent should be in any way representative of so mixed a people, compounded of so many European strains, as we who have exterminated and displaced them, is a thought more worthy of savages who believe that the strength of their enemy passes into them when they eat him, than of our vaunted intelligence, fortified by ethnological science. We should hardly entertain it if we were not misled by the interest that attaches to anything unusual or outlandish, and tempted by certain idiomatic peculiarities of these monotonous strains to exploit their "local color." This may very well be done now and then for an artistic holiday, as MacDowell has done it in his Indian Suite; but if a folk-music is to enter vitally into art it must bring with it something more than quaintness or distinctive idioms, it must be genuinely expressive of the temperament of the people using it; and of the complex American temper Indian music can never be thus representative.

Somewhat similar considerations apply to the British folk-songs, which, introduced by our pioneering grandfathers, have in remote regions like the Kentucky mountains survived uncontaminated by modernisms, and have recently been rediscovered and widely acclaimed. Here again the piquancy of unfamiliar idiom and a simplicity that falls agreeably on over-stimulated ears has aroused an enthusiasm that overshoots its mark. By all means let us enjoy these fresh songs, and even embody them in our music if we find it an interesting experiment. But can we expect that they will have any far-reaching interpretative value for us, that they will express our national temper? That they are not even native to the soil is a minor objection to them, for we are importations ourselves. But that they are, with all their charm, British through and through, makes it unlikely that they can adequately reflect a nation which, though partly British, is also partly almost everything else.

The case of rag-time is rather more subtle. Here is a music, local and piquantly idiomatic, and undeniably representative of a certain aspect of American character—our restlessness, our insatiable nervous activity, our thoughtless superficial "optimism", our fondness for "hustling", our carelessness of whither, how, or why we are moving if only we can "keep on the move." If this were the whole of us, if the first impression which foreigners get of

us, summed up for them oftentimes in our inimitably characteristic "Step lively, please", were also the last, and there was nothing more solid, sweet or wise in America than this galvanic twitching, then indeed rag-time would be our perfect music. But every true American knows that, on the contrary, this is not our virtue but our vice, not our strength but our weakness, and that such a picture of us as it presents is not a portrait but a caricature. And similarly, as soon as we examine rag-time at all critically we discover its essential triviality. Its melodies are commonplace, its harmonies cheap, shoddy and sentimental. Even its rhythm is a clever formula rather than a creative form, a trick for giving ordinary movement a specious air of animation. It is, in fact, as a writer in the London *Times*[1] points out, "a debased imitation of genuine negro song, just as the popular Gaiety favorites of the late eighties, 'Enniscorthy' and 'Ballyhooley', were debased imitations of a certain class of Irish folk-song." A few lines later this same writer falls into the pitfall always yawning for the theorist about rag-time, asks if the American composer will arrive who can extract gold from this ore, states coolly that "Rag-time represents the American nation", and of course ends up with an edifying reference to an art "really vital because it has its roots in its own soil." Does he consider that "Ballyhooley" "represents the Irish nation"? Would he advise Sir Charles Stanford to write a symphony upon it? Only an American journalist could be more naïve, and here is one that is. "The important point", he says, "is that rag-time, whether it be adjudged good or bad, is original with Americans—it is their own creation."[2] This beggars comment.

II.

So far our results are mainly negative. We have discovered fallacies in several assumptions too commonly and easily made. We have set a lower estimate on purely geographical considerations than is often set. We have tried to distinguish between what in a popular strain is merely quaint or piquant because of peculiarities of idiom, and what is more profoundly true in expression to a national or racial temper; and while admitting the superficial charm of such idioms and of the "distinctiveness" to which they minister, we have insisted on the far deeper import of interpretative truth. We have glanced at the danger of confounding

[1] *Times*, London, February 8, 1913.

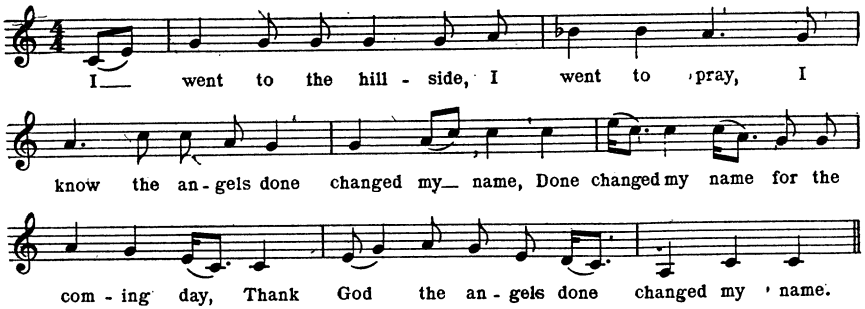
[2] Quoted by Mr. Charles L. Buchanan in an admirably sane article on "Rag-Time and American Music" in *The Opera Magazine*, February, 1916.

appeal to the majority with appeal to good taste, which is always outvoted, or of supposing that "originality" is of any importance in comparison with merit. From these criticisms certain positive principles thus tend to emerge. It becomes evident that there is a certain gradation of values in the qualities which a folk-music may possess. Distinctiveness of idiom is a merit, but a less vital one than interpretative power; higher than either is beauty, suitability to enter into music that may bear comparison with the best music of the world. Is there any body of folk-song available to Americans that possesses any or all of these merits in a higher degree than the types we have examined?

We seem to discover such a richer vein in the songs of the negroes—not the debased forms found in rag-time and the "coon-songs" of the minstrel shows, but the genuine old plantation tunes, the "spirituals" and "shouts" of the slaves. In idiomatic individuality, to begin with, both of harmonic interval and rhythmic figure, these songs will compare favorably with those of any European nation. With many of these they share, indeed, odd modal intervals of great antiquity, such as the lowered seventh scale-step in major and the raised sixth-step in minor. Like

The Angels Done Changed My Name

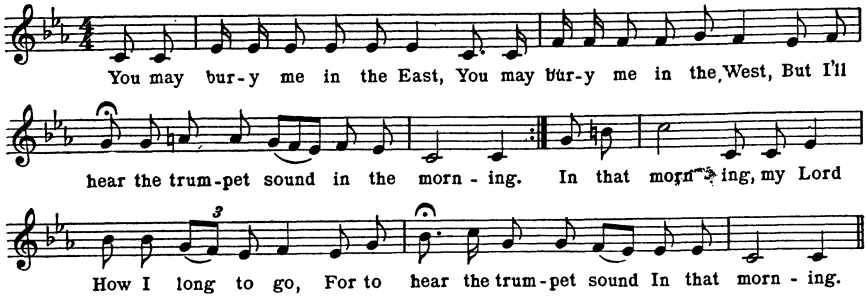
From "Jubilee Songs"



Scottish tunes they make frequent use of the incomplete or pentatonic scale, omitting the fourth and seventh steps. A peculiarity in which they are almost unique is a curious oscillation between a major key and its relative minor, especially at cadences, so that one gets a haunting sense of uncertainty that enhances tenfold their plaintiveness. In "The Angels Done Changed My Name" are exemplified the lowered seventh step—at "I went to pray"—and the pentatonic scale; in "You May Bury Me in the East" the raised sixth step—to the word "trumpet"—and

You May Bury Me in the East

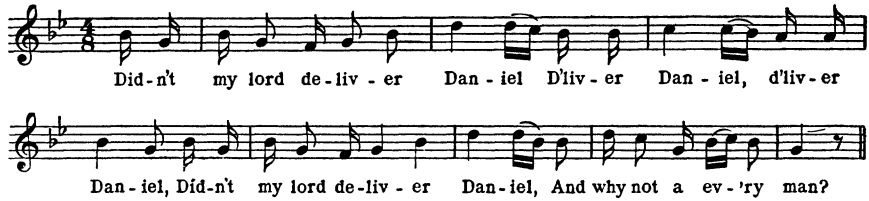
From "Jubilee and Plantation Songs"



the major-minor cadence. The last line begins unmistakably in E flat, and ends equally unmistakably in C minor, and gets from that veering in the wind, so to speak, a peculiar flavor which we should recognize anywhere as "Negro." It is noteworthy that both these songs have to be harmonized strongly and simply with the staple triads—it is impossible to harmonize them otherwise. In other words they are the product and expression of a primitive but pure and strong tonal sense, refreshingly free from the effeminate chromatic harmonies—the "barber-shop chords"— of rag-time. The one compares with the other as the fervent childish poetry of the lines here, "Thank God the angels done changed my name," or "I'll hear the trumpet sound in that morning" compares with the slangy doggerel of the cabarets.(1)

It is often stated that the chief rhythmic characteristic of the negro music is the so-called "Scotch jerk", the jump away from the normally accented note to another, thrice exemplified in the third line of "The Angels Done Changed My Name", and imitated in rag-time. A more typical instance of it is "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," which also further illustrates major-

Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?



[1]For example:

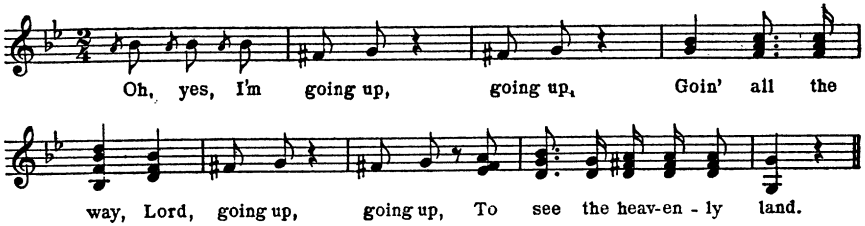
"They got a fiddler there
That always slickens his hair,
An' folks he sure do pull some bow."

from "The Memphis Blues", in which Mr. H. K. Moderwell assures us we shall find "characteristic verse of a high order."

minor idiom in its constant see-saw between G minor and B flat major. It is pointed out that the slaves had a strong sense of time, that the overwhelming majority of their songs are in duple or march time, with very few in the more graceful but less vehement triple measure, and that in their "shouts" or religious dances they rocked themselves into paroxysms of rhythmic excitement, one group clapping the metre while the others sang and scuffled with a "jerking, twitching motion which agitated the entire shouter and soon brought out streams of perspiration."(1) No doubt the jerk evidences their love of strong accentuation; but it must be noted that accentuation is a purely local thing, affects the metre rather than the rhythm, and may be assumed and put off by a tune (as in the "ragging" of a standard melody) without changing its essential curve.

Far more significant, therefore, than their half-barbaric fondness for the jerk is the grasp shown by negroes over the larger and nobler reaches of rhythm, their feeling for the phrase as a whole and ability to impress upon it a firm and yet varied profile. The second half of "You May Bury Me in the East", with its bold festooning of outline, even more strikingly the tune "Going Up",

Going Up



with its piquant silences and its even-paced insistence on "going all the way, Lord", show a unity in their variety, a certain "all-of-a-piece-ness", compared with which even "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" seems scrappy, and the ordinary rag-time effusion pitifully poverty-stricken. There is plenty of internal evidence, too, that these happy results are attributable to genuine musical imagination, and not to luck in the servile following of felicitous word-patterns. Indeed, the frequency with which unimportant words are accented and important ones slurred over shows that, as is so often the case with great melodists like Schubert, the words were regarded more or less as convenient pegs to hang the melodies on, and the specifically musical faculty did not easily brook interference. "The negroes keep exquisite time",

[1] *The Nation*, May 30, 1867.

writes one of the editors of "Slave Songs in the United States", the best of the collections, "and do not suffer themselves to be daunted by any obstacle in the words. The most obstinate hymns they will force to do duty with any tune they please, and will dash heroically through a trochaic tune at the head of a column of iambs with wonderful skill." The sense of independent tone-pattern, which when possessed by individual geniuses in supreme degree gives us the immortal melodies of a Beethoven or a Brahms, waxes and wanes in these childlike tunes, sometimes falling back into platitude, but sometimes advancing to a real distinction and beauty.

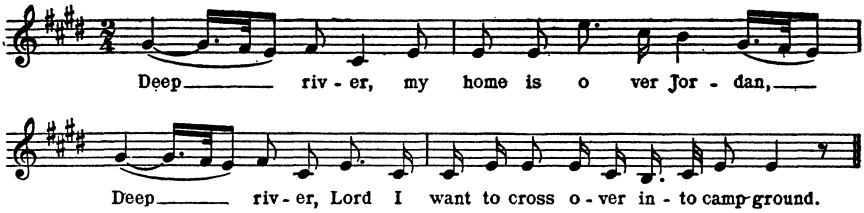
Whether this beauty is of the kind we have desiderated as the highest quality folk-song can have, rendering it "suitable to enter into music that may bear comparison with the best music of the world", is a further question, and one which brings us at length to the highly controversial matter of the kind of treatment that the composer should give folk-material in incorporating it into his more finished art. The variations of taste concerned here are so subtle that probably unanimity of judgment, even if it be desirable, will never be attained. Yet it is certain that treatment of some sort there must be. The mere collecting, collating, and setting forth of folk-songs, attractively arranged for instruments or even orchestrated, such as we have seen much of from all countries in recent years, is no more musical art than a pile of bricks is a building, or a series of anecdotes literature. So far as it tends to content the public with such potpourris, the fad for folk-song is positively injurious to taste, in something the same way that our modern floods of petty journalism are injurious to the capacity for sustained reading. Moreover, even on their own level such medleys are apt to be unsatisfactory; for the tunes themselves are so definite, brief, and complete, and the transitional passages between them are therefore so obtrusively transitional, that the net effect is that of the ill-baked bread pudding from which we eat nothing but the raisins. Mr. Coleridge-Taylor's "Twenty-Four Negro Melodies", despite incidental attractions, are on the whole an example of this bad model.

Far worse, however, are those "improvements" of folk-song which consist in a general prettifying of its homely simplicity with all the refinements and luxuries of sophisticated musical technique—as if a country maiden should conceal her healthy color under layers of rouge. Strange that composers skilful enough to use them should not recognize the inappropriateness of Wagnerian chromatics and Debussyan whole-tone scale

harmonies, to say nothing of all sorts of rich dissonantal trappings, to tunes as diatonic as "God Save the King" and as square-cut as the "Hymn of Joy." One would think that the sense of humor, which revels in incongruity in music as in other things, would keep them from doing it and us from taking it so seriously. It would be invidious to name examples, but they can be discovered by the discerning; for not even the negro complexion is proof against this brand of talcum powder.

The kind of change that is both legitimate and necessary may perhaps be best suggested by another example, "Deep River."

Deep River



Here we have, in the first phrase, that free and firm moulding of rhythmic pattern which is often so surprising in these songs, so that we might look far in the best composers without finding its peer in deliberate, calm beauty. But just as our hearts are responding to the wave of emotion thus generated it strikes, so to speak, a dead wall, falls shattered, and has to begin over again, without being able to recover the lost momentum. The imagination is vital as far as it goes, but its span is short, it lacks sustained power and cumulative force. What is needed in the composer who would deal with such material, then, in addition to a tact that enters into its spirit, is a synthetic imagination capable of rounding out its incompleteness, of tracing the whole of the curve it suggests, of developing into full life what it presents only as a germ.

How difficult such a truly creative treatment is, only those fully know who have tried it; how rare, musical literature testifies. To add a measure to a folk-song is almost like adding a cubit to one's stature, and for the same reason—that addition is not what is requisite, but organic growth. That it is possible we see in Brahms's masterly treatment of German student songs in his "Academic Festival Overture"; that it can be applied to negro melodies we have been shown especially by Dvořák. In his "New World" Symphony and his "American" Quartet and Quintet he assimilated a peculiar idiom so perfectly that there is

not a note, even in the highly complex harmonies toward the end of the symphony, that does not take its place in the scheme unobtrusively. While the harmonic idiom preponderantly of simple triads dictated by the material is maintained with an unerring sense of style, these commonest of all chords are so deftly managed that they never become commonplace. The twin pitfalls of platitude and sophistication are avoided with equal success. The same felicity is attained in the construction. However brief the themes, they do not sound trivial or unconvincing, because we feel they have reached their natural growth. Above all, the same sympathy and power that are shown in these technical matters so control the conception as a whole that these works form a true idealization of negro feeling, in its moods both of half-barbaric dance and of naïvely pathetic sentiment.

Dvořák's example suffices then by itself to show that the negro music, in the hands of a master, is capable of two of the three qualities we demanded of any folk-song—idiomatic distinctiveness and capacity for organized beauty. Does he also demonstrate in it the third—adequacy to interpret the American temper? Something closely kindred to that temper and easily endeared to it there certainly is in the restless rhythmic energy, the unceasing motion and quick changes of these scherzos, the vigor and dispatch of these allegro movements. Like similar syncopations and other rhythmic peculiarities that we find in those of our composers who have more than their share of our national nervous energy, such as Chadwick and Whiting, the negro rhythms have a crispness and buoyancy that is somehow appropriate to our clear skies and self-helpful society. They give at least a far fairer portrait of us than the caricature of rag-time. In its more sentimental moods, too, negro music has an unsophistication, an unreserved naïveté, that reminds us of similar traits in the traditional conception of our fellow-countrymen. It thus seems to express more of our national temperament, and to leave less of it unexpressed than would on the whole any other body of folk-song.

Yet the very attempt to formulate these considerations forces us to realize how hopelessly inadequate they are as an account of the possibilities of America in music. The picture they give of the national type may do something like justice to it as it existed in earlier times and simpler surroundings, as it appears, for instance, in the pages of Mark Twain or Bret Harte, and as it is symbolised in the person of Uncle Sam; but the modern American is a being quite other, far more complex, far more cosmopolitan,

the American not of nineteenth century New England but of the twentieth century "melting pot." He is wholly incommensurate not only with negro music or any folk-music, but with even individual composers like Dvořák in whom emotion far outruns intellectual subtlety. No folk-music, let us repeat, no individual composer, no school of composers, can "express" America. The age of such simplicities is past, if it ever existed. Whether we like it or not, we have to take our age and our country as they are; they are an age of rapidly accelerating intercommunication of all peoples and a country in which the internationalism that thus slowly results is being hastened by actual admixture on a heretofore unprecedented scale. Such a condition doubtless has its bad as well as its good aspects; but if those who bemoan our "featureless cosmopolitanism" and advocate an impossible parochialism as the only remedy would try rather to see how a wider outlook and a larger sympathy may deepen our art and make it more truly human by laying less stress on local, national, or even racial types, and more on the untrammeled expression of the greatest possible variety of individuals, music would fare better. "National literature:" wrote Goethe to Eckerman in 1827, "the term has no longer much meaning to-day; the time for universal literature is come, and each ought to work to hasten its advent." Signs are not wanting that the condition thus discerned by the wisest men a century ago is now gradually getting itself acknowledged in general practice.